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ABSTRACT

In many advertising programs, students spend a great deal of time coming up with creative strategies, writing copy, and preparing layouts based on objectives provided by a client (or professor) and directed to an already established target market. Seldom, however, do students learn firsthand about the advertising decision making on the part of either the corporate advertiser or the consumer. To provide this experience, two new courses called "The Advertiser" and "The Audience" were developed. "The Advertiser" was organized to allow students to follow advertising decision making from the local to the regional to the national levels by talking with corporate executives making the advertising decisions. The other course, "The Audience," was developed not to teach copytesting, but to help students learn through personal interviews about the consumer decision making that leads to a sale. (Author/SG)

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Advertising Division
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Paper Submitted to the Advertising Division of the
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
April, 1991

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Early mass communication theorists often used the terms "source" and "receiver" in their linear models to represent the emanator and recipient of a message transmitted through a channel of communication. (1) As the models developed more sophistication, new terms like "feedback" and "noise" were introduced and the concept of a communication process rather than a linear transmission took form. (2) Theorists then began to talk of the need to strive for shared meaning in order to have effective communication. (3)

In many of our advertising courses we ask the students to act as the source of persuasive communication to a target audience (receiver) that has already been defined or delineated by a client. We ask the students to use their creative abilities and their understanding of the need for shared meaning to create effective advertising messages. Often this situation is couched in directions that the students act as agency creatives or account people who have this advertiser as a client.

Two years ago when our faculty approached making some changes in our curriculum, we began discussing the need for our students to understand more about the decision-making that precedes the creative effort from the advertiser's perspective and the need for them to understand what the consumer's reaction to the resultant creative effort might be. It was not that we had never discussed these aspects with our students. It was not that we had neglected to talk about advertiser needs and objectives or that we had ignored consumer views, but we

discovered that we had been placing our emphasis on creative strategy and execution (the message) based on the marketing objectives and target audience often suggested or provided by an advertiser without a full understanding of the assumptions underlying those objectives or the reasons a particular target audience was selected.

In other words, we had asked our students to talk with advertisers or consumers more about the "whats" rather than the "whys" related to their decision-making. Students were instructed to ask real-world clients what they wanted to say, or what they wanted to accomplish, or what time frame they wanted to work in, etc. but they were not coached to inquire about why the advertiser wanted to advertise, why they thought advertising worked, or why they thought that particular target market was the best one for their product. As a result, students proceeded to the creative tasks armed with the answers to the "what" questions and functioning under such common assumptions as: (1) advertisers advertise because they think advertising works, (2) advertisers spend money to advertise because they want to distinguish their brand from the competition, and (3) advertisers talk to a particular target market because they think those people are the most likely buyers of their product. But, we asked, are these assumptions valid? Are these assumptions actually the ones held by corporate decision-makers? Do these assumptions underlie the objectives being set by the advertising executives?

We decided to offer a Special Topics course that would give the students a chance to talk with advertisers -- at the local,

regional and national levels and ask those advertisers to discuss not so much the nuts and bolts of how much money they spend, or what the latest advertising objectives might be, but to inquire about why they advertise, what they think advertising does for them, and how they think it works. We wanted the students to delve into what assumptions underlie the daily or weekly or monthly decision-making related to the company's advertising. In addition, we hoped the students could learn whether the assumptions functioning on the local level matched the suppositions on the other levels.

We also wanted the students to look at the advertising process from the ground up, rather than from the top down. We wanted them to explore advertising decisions made from the point of sale up to the national office. We wanted them to start at the point where the purchase decision is made (local retailer) and work up the levels to where the corporate headquarters decision-making is done.

In addition, we wanted them to explore the decision-making processes on the part of the consumer that lead to a sale. We decided not to have them copytest, but rather talk to consumers about the advertising they remembered, their reactions to it, and the reasons they decided to make certain purchases. We would have the students talk to consumers about the products and advertising of the companies who had been studied in the advertiser section of the course.

What we hoped to accomplish was to give the students a new perspective concerning the "source" and "receiver" of the

advertising communication and the decision-making that leads to a particular message being sent or received. We hoped to expand their understanding of the "whys" related to decision-making on the part of both the advertiser and the consumer.

We taught the course over two semesters with The Advertiser focus coming in the fall and The Audience emphasis in the spring. We invited our top senior students to be part of this experience and explained that it was not required that they take both semesters, but that we hoped some would choose to stay with us over the year. Several did remain with the project both semesters.

The first time through the class we selected four retailers with major corporation ties (franchise, local owner or manager) located in a town of 6,000 people approximately 20 miles from this midwestern campus. Deciding to use a small town allowed us to track the local advertising more easily, focus on four businesses that were well-known by a large percentage of the population, and more easily arrange personal interviews with a number of the town's residents. The second time through we chose another small town about 40 miles from campus and selected four different types of businesses with national distribution of their products.

The businesses we studied were a new car dealership, a pizza restaurant, a discount store and a hardware/country store. (For the second round of the course we used a fast food restaurant, another car manufacturer, a seed company, and a department store.) We started by having the students look into the local

advertising that had been done in the community over the last several weeks and investigating what was happening in the way of national advertising for those selected businesses. In addition, the students began doing background work on the companies themselves to discover how they were structured managerially and financially.

Then the primary research began. The students were divided into four groups, one for each business. They made appointments to talk in person with the owner or manager of the local store or dealership. We provided transportation to the town and dropped off the teams at their appointments. Each team prepared a set of questions to ask the retailers that had been approved by the professors teaching the course and was based on the background information that had been gathered. The questions were designed to elicit discussion of how the owner or manager viewed advertising -- how it works, how do they know when it works, who is their target audience, how do they know that is their audience, how do they decide when and how to advertise? The students also asked the local advertisers to describe what help or guidance they get from the regional or national office related to their advertising. They were then asked for the names and office addresses of those at the next level of decision-making. In addition, the owners or managers were asked for their opinion of the national advertising. They were assured that their opinions would not be passed on to management people at any other level.

The next set of interviews was conducted by phone or in person depending on the location of the regional office. Two of the four regional offices were within an hour of the campus and were visited in person by the team accompanied by the professor. Two regional representatives were interviewed using a speaker phone so that all team members could ask questions and hear the answers. For all of the interviews, the students took tape recorders with them and asked permission to tape the discussion. In most cases, the interviewees agreed to the use of the tape with the understanding that their views would not be attributed to them in speaking with the next level unless they wanted that to be the case. The regional office advertising decision-makers were asked the same questions as the local dealers. They then provided names of the next level of decision-makers that should be contacted. The number of layers it took to reach the national office depended on the structure of the business.

In three of the four cases the students were successful in interviewing someone at all levels up to and including the corporate headquarters. One team was invited (and did go)to Detroit to spend a day with the national advertising manager of one of the big three car manufacturers and her staff. Ironically, in the one case where the students were blocked from access to top management (by phone and by letter), the company has promoted itself as being employee-oriented and caring for the local communities in which it is located.

Each team prepared a written report and gave an oral presentation to the class and the advertising faculty summarizing

its findings and its views concerning the assumptions and advertising decision-making of the corporation studied. In addition, each corporate office was asked if it wanted a copy of the final report.

The next semester the students studied the consumer viewpoint of the advertising of these same four businesses by talking to the people living in the town where the local outlet was located. Each team had at least one member who had participated in The Advertiser semester. The new team members started their background research by familiarizing themselves with the former team's report. They then went on to update the information available about the local and national advertising for the businesses and any new happenings related to corporate management or financial decisions. From there, the class spent several class periods talking about survey methods, questionnaire design, interviewing techniques and sampling methods. The class then designed a set of questions to ask the local townspeople. Each team would ask questions about its own business as well as one of the other three being studied.

At the next stage, a random sample of resident names was selected from the town's telephone directory with 3 times more names drawn than needed to have each team end up with at least twenty interviews. When the calls were made to set up the personal interviews, the students alternated asking to speak with the male or female adult in the household. The team and their professors then drove to the town and conducted the interviews on afternoons that the class usually met, although some team members

did need to return on other days in order to complete all of the interviews. Each team used a tape recorder during the interview unless the interviewee objected. The teams worked in sets of two students for each interviewee. The interviews lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour.

Students transcribed the interviews, analyzed the qualitative interview data they had gathered, then prepared a written and oral report of their findings which was presented to the class and the advertising faculty. At various points during the semester, the students were also asked to evaluate the contribution of the various members of their team to the group's effort. Those evaluations plus the professors' assessment of the individual and group performances were used to determine student grades in the course.

What did the students learn?

Their oral presentations and final written reports indicated that:

(a) corporate decision-makers don't always understand why some advertising approaches work better than others, but they do believe it can work.

(b) various levels in the corporate system do not always agree on the value or success of any particular advertising approach.

(c) the corporate headquarters often does not understand the local owners/manager's concerns about how the advertising is, or is not, working.

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(b) various levels in the corporate system do not always agree on the value or success of any particular advertising approach.

(c) the corporate headquarters often does not understand the local owners/manager's concerns about how the advertising is, or is not, working.

(d) the local advertiser believes she/he knows who the customer is, and that customer may not match the corporate version of who the target market is.

(e) a lot of decision-making is done based on past experience and intuition rather than hard data.

(f) even though a company claims to have open communication among its employees, top management may not want to discuss its views on how advertising works.

(g) some management people are concerned that students might be spies from the competition trying to get confidential competitor information.

(h) local advertisers can tell when the advertising approach is not working earlier than corporate management can.

(i) advertising must be successful in getting the consumer into the local store or dealership if a sale is going to be made, e.g., all advertising must work on the local level no matter where it might emanate.

(j) advertising is not uppermost in the minds of consumers.

(k) consumers can tell you a lot about the advertising they remember even though they often claim it does not influence them to buy that product.

(l) consumers sometimes can tell you that a particular ad prompted them to go buy a particular product or brand.

(m) consumers have strong opinions about advertising and their views may not match students' views.

(n) consumers have a variety of reasons for buying or using a product and they can tell you about those reasons very eloquently.

(o) consumers may remember ads for products they will never have a need to buy or use.

(p) although the advertising may build a certain image of a store, if the store itself does not fit that image, the advertising is not considered to be honest.

None of these findings is particularly earth-shaking in and of itself, although, some of the viewpoints discovered by the students might be labeled as unexpected. And, several of the points confirm the collective wisdom of today's advertising practitioners. However, what we found to be the most important part of these discoveries is that the students uncovered them for themselves. They didn't learn about them from a professor, or find them in a textbook, but rather they gleaned them from their own investigation of the relationship between the source and the receiver of the advertising message.

ENDNOTES

1. Wilbur Schramm, "How Communication Works," in The Process and Effects of Mass Communication (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1954), pp. 3-26.

2. Bruce Westley and Malcolm MacLean, "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research," Journalism Quarterly 34 (1957): 31-38.

3. David K. Berlo, The Process of Communication (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 168-216.